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A History of the Concept of God: A Process Approach

Daniel A. Dombrowski

New York: State University of New York Press, 2016. 273 pages. Paperback. ISBN 978-1438459363.

In this fascinating book, Daniel A. Dombrowski offers us a history of the concept of God from a neoclassical (or process) perspective, aiming to show how both the classical and neoclassical conceptions of God developed, with Plato being the common source for both.

Dombrowski helpfully outlines the distinction between classical and neoclassical theism early on (9-16), and it is worth briefly summarizing four of the key differences here. First, while classical theism takes God to be creator of the universe *ex nihilo*, neoclassical theism holds that God does not create the universe at all but rather seeks to order a world that already exists. Second, while classical theism takes God to already know in advance everything that will ever happen, neoclassical theism denies that this is possible in cases where future events, such as the actions of free beings, are still indeterminate; in such cases, God will come to know of them as and when they happen. Third, while classical theism construes God as timeless and impassible (i.e., incapable of change), neoclassical theism holds that God is inside time and can and does change. And lastly, while classical theism describes God in monopolar terms (monopolarity involves taking attributes that are polar opposites, such as necessity and contingency, activity and passivity, and affirming one of God while utterly denying the other), neoclassical theism opts to describe God in dipolar terms. A key motivator for the development of the neoclassical conception of God was to sidestep what were perceived to be deep-seated problems with the classical conception. Indeed, according to Nicholas Berdyaev, one of the thinkers featured in this book, traditional theology leads people to become atheists (165), a view Dombrowski appears to share.

The book contains twenty-five chapters divided into four distinct parts. Part 1 charts the history of classical theism through nine thinkers, Philo through to Kant; part 2 examines ancient Greek theism through three thinkers, Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus; part 3 charts the history of neoclassical theism through nine thinkers, from Faustus Socinus to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin; while part 4 focuses on Bergson and Whitehead, two of “the greatest neoclassical or process theists” (4). While it is perhaps surprising that there is no chapter dedicated to Charles Hartshorne, in whom the neoclassical concept of God finds its greatest expression, Dombrowski explains that there was no need because “the entire project relies on Hartshorne” (131) and the book as a whole is “written from Hartshornian perspective” (191). And indeed, the influence of Hartshorne is very great. In some chapters, there are more references to Hartshorne’s take on a particular philosopher than there are references to that philosopher’s own work (in the chapter on Aristotle, for example, there are twenty references to Hartshorne’s work compared to three to Aristotle’s own works).

Moreover, Hartshorne’s inspiration shows itself in other ways. In terms of style, for example, Dombrowski’s book owes a debt to Hartshorne’s *Insights and Oversights of Great Thinkers* (State University of New York Press, 1983), which offers a critical survey of the history of Western philosophy from the perspective of process thought. In a similar vein, what Dombrowski offers here is perhaps best described as a critical history, or perhaps even a polemical history, as it is in many ways as much a defense of the neoclassical concept of God as a history of its development. Indeed, the neoclassical concept of God is used throughout as a yardstick by which the philosophers treated in the book are judged. So, for example, we are told that had Augustine realized that possibilities and probabilities are possibilities and probabilities, and are not knowable as anything else, he would not have endorsed the notion of omniscience that he did (22). Moreover, Dombrowski shows not just where various philosophers fell short of the neoclassical conception of God, but also where previous

histories of God (by Karen Armstrong, Paul Capetz, and John Bowker) have gone astray in their accounts, by neglecting developments in neoclassical theism.

While I have no hesitation recommending the book as a complement to Hartshorne's *Insights and Oversights*, and as an excellent work in its own right, I do think it worth noting one rather major omission. In part 3 of the book, which surveys the development of the neoclassical concept of God, Dombrowski begins with Faustus Socinus (1539-1604) before moving on to Schelling (1775-1854). Yet between these two there lived another philosopher who arguably came much closer to the neoclassical conception of God than did anyone else before Alfred North Whitehead in the early twentieth century; the philosopher in question was André-Pierre Le Guay de Prémontval (1716-1764). Like Socinus, Prémontval believed that God existed in time and that his knowledge did not extend to future events, which were genuinely undetermined and hence unknowable in advance. But Prémontval went further, insisting that God is the creator only of the world's *order* rather than the world *per se*, and that God is restricted to acting on the world by influence rather than by fiat. Moreover, he also gestures at a dipolar notion of God. It is in fact quite remarkable how Prémontval's theology prefigures in a number of ways the theology Dombrowski defends so passionately throughout this book, making his omission here all the more regrettable. This is, nonetheless, a fine book, and while those unfamiliar with process theology might want to start with something a bit more introductory, they ought to avail themselves of Dombrowski's book soon after.

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